

Topography of the Family: On Ideology, Science, Religion, and the Politics of Conjugal, Filial and Gendered Life

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Our interdisciplinary student seminar would deal with various notions of family—identifying and understand cross-cultural trends and differences in defining family, the roles of gender and of sexuality, the state's influence on perceptions of family, and what marriage means religiously, legalistically, libidinally. We both think this would be a particularly appropriate and interesting topic to explore through an interdisciplinary approach: English, Anthropology, History, Political Science, Religion, Biology, Economics, Philosophy, Feminist and Gender Studies are a few of the disciplines that seem especially relevant, and could be investigated profitably in our seminar by looking at the phenomenon of marriage and the reasons that certain ideologies might depend upon, in a number of ways, one particular political, religious, and legal definition of marriage. By variously historicizing and theorizing the family and marriage—by interrogating through a variety of interdisciplinary lenses the discourses that attempt to underpin and justify these ideas and practices—we hope to understand more concretely the particular attractions that the institutions of marriage and the family may hold; and, by doing so, we hope to be better situated to critique these ideas and practices (and to appreciate relevant critiques) in problematizing the present existence of the family and marriage. At the same time, we hope to recuperate some notions of romantic and filial love and relations, reawakening the potentialities of such worn, yet still-powerful concepts and drives for the individual and their society. This seminar would not seek predominantly to create a single improved definition of familial worth, but rather to understand better past and present definitions across a variety of cultural landscapes, thereby allowing us productively to analyze, criticize, evaluate, and appreciate the precepts and problems involved with creating filial, marital, and sexual systems.